The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about winter clothes

藏 (radical 草 = grass cao3, grass) = collect/hoard. Squirrels 貯藏 (zhu4 cang2 = hoard-store) nuts for winter. Spy 藏身 (cang2 shen1 = hide-body = hides) in secret spot.

金屋藏娇 (jin1 wu1 cang2 jiao1 = gold-house-hide-beauty) describes rich man keeping mistress.

Each family has 家藏 (jia1 cang2 = family-collection = heirloom). Jewelry/artworks are 珍藏 (zhen1 cang2 = precious-store = valuable collections).

冬衣 (dong1 yi1 = winter-clothes) need 洗熨 (xi3 tang4 = washing-ironing), 乾洗 (gan1 xi3 = dry-cleaning), 收藏 (shou1 cang2 = collect-hide = putting away). Storing 棉 (mian2, cottons), 麻 (ma2, linens), 絲 (si1, silks), 毛 (mao2, woolens) needs 防潮剂 (fang2 chao2 ji4 = prevent-humid-agent = anti-blushing agent), 椋腦丸 (zhang1 nao4 wan2 = camphor-balls).

by Diana Yue